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EDITORIAL: THE MANY FACES OF SUSTAINABILITY IN EDUCATION EXPANSION, INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

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Sustainability is a recent and very slippery concept, and in this Special Issue of *NORRAG NEWS* it is applied to a whole range of its possible meanings. But as often in *NORRAG NEWS*, we shall seek to imbue its present meanings with some sense of history, by reviewing the way that notions of sustainability, sustained commitments, and sustainable financing come increasingly to feature in the main policy papers on education.

Almost twenty years ago, at the World Conference on Education for All at Jomtien in March 1990, there is no use of the term ‘sustainability’, but interestingly enough in respect of one of our key concerns in the NN40, the notion that development agencies should get involved in extended commitment to supporting national and regional activities in Education for All (EFA) was already there. Just to underline the meaning of ‘sustained’, it is married with ‘long-term’!

Development agencies establish policies and plans for the 1990s, in line with their commitments **to sustained, long-term** support for national and regional actions and increase their financial and technical assistance to basic education accordingly. (WCEFA, 1990: Framework: 16 emphasis added)

But this ‘aid commitment’ needs to be set alongside the equally strong focus on the need for ‘the long-term commitment of governments and their national partners’ to reach the targets they have set for themselves. In other words, Jomtien is far from being about aid commitments only. It is about the sustained political commitment of national governments.

Also in 1990, there was another first: the *Human Development Report 1990*. This had an interesting section on what they termed ‘Sustained human development’. The report’s authors recognized that there was no single high road to success in sustained human development in their illustrative case studies in Korea, Malaysia, Botswana, Sri Lanka and Costa Rica:

Countries with progress in human development often started from very different initial conditions in 1960 and have at times followed quite different routes to sustain their success. (UNDP, HDR, 1990: 44)

Almost exactly a year later, in 1991, the World Bank’s very influential first policy paper on vocational and technical education and training came out, and again there was no mention of ‘sustainability’, but there was a recognition that the reforms needed in the sphere of skills development would require both stability of national funding and what they termed ‘sustained institutional capacity for policy implementation’ (World Bank, 1991: 15-16). This latter is an intriguing concept, because, coming at a time when the World Bank was very interested in the notion of

Capacity Building, it often meant capacity to implement World Bank-compatible policies (See [NORRAG NEWS 10](#), 1991 on Education Research Capacity). Be that as it may, the Bank's 1991 paper also acknowledged a crucial second meaning of sustainability: and that was the notion that public sector training can be effective where there is sustained economic growth. In other words, where there is buoyant growth as today in India or China, it is possible, and indeed essential for the graduates of public training institutions to walk straight out of their classes into plentiful employment. On the other hand, where the 'sustained economic growth' is actually just a reflection of a change in commodity prices, it may indeed turn out to be 'jobless growth'. Thus, the utilisation and allocation of skills in a dynamic, expanding economy are fundamentally different from macroeconomic situations in which there is no sustained growth, and where there is poor governance. In South Korea and China, there has been employment for TVET graduates of almost all institutions; while in a stagnant economy like Sri Lanka, there may only be jobs for some of the very best students. Clearly, the economy counts.

Once the Rio Conference on Environment and Development had taken place in 1992, there was a subsequent recognition of the consequences of education for sustainable development and vice versa. Thus, in the words of the Delors Report of 1996, 'The notion of sustainability further complements that of human development' (UNESCO, 1996: 78). The discourse was no longer just about 'sustained long-term' support as in Jomtien, but it included the term 'sustainable' and 'sustainability'. This would be one of the differences between Jomtien and the World Education Forum (WEF), ten years later, in 2000, as we shall see in a moment.

Sustainability had been re-discovered at Rio, building on Stockholm and Brundtland, but soon the concept was no longer confined to the environment; indeed, it could be argued that environmental sustainability could not be pursued satisfactorily on its own. A good example of this was the influential OECD DAC report, *Shaping the 21st century: the contribution of development cooperation* (1996). OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) is the body that drew up the International Development Targets (IDTs) which in turn largely became the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) four years later. It illustrated this new multisectoral approach to sustainability as follows:

It is now clear that **not only environmental, but also social, cultural and political sustainability of development efforts** are essential for the security and well-being of people and the functioning of the complex, interdependent global system now emerging (OECD DAC 1996:5 emphasis added)

Of course, it is known that the OECD translated this concern into an IDT which required that the present loss of environmental resources should be reversed at both global and national levels by 2015. What is much less well-known is that the document also specified that there were a series of 'additional key elements' such as the rule of law, democratic accountability, protection of human rights which 'sustainable development needs to integrate, not all of which lend themselves to indicators along the lines' suggested in the IDTs. But OECD warned: '**While not themselves the subject of suggested numerical indicators, we reaffirm our conviction that these qualitative aspects of development are essential to the attainment of the more measurable goals we have suggested**' (OECD DAC, 1996:

11 emphasis in original). This crucial emphasis on multisectoral sustainability was lost in the desire for simple quantification whether in the IDTs or in the MDGs, because it could not be so easily translated into a numerical target. But we shall note it reappears in later documentation.

By the time of the World Education Forum (WEF) in Dakar, in 2000, education could be projected not just as a human right, but ‘as the key to sustainable development and peace and stability’ (WEF, 2000: 2). But beyond this very generalized ambition, there were much more specific uses of sustainable, for example in the demand for EFA to be delivered within ‘a sustainable and well-integrated sector framework’ (WEF, 2000: 10), and also in the emphasis on EFA plans being based on (national) sustainable financial frameworks. It is noteworthy that this discourse is not about aid being sustained, but is principally about the crucial need for country resources to be available – not just to reach EFA – but to sustain it. Equally with the concept of ownership: EFA has to be a country responsibility first and foremost, and hence there needs to be ‘real and sustained ownership’ of the EFA Goals. It is worth underlining this emphasis on ‘sustained political commitment’ at the national level, since this seems to be much less quoted than the mantra, from the same paragraph, about the availability of aid: ‘No countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by lack of resources’ (WEF, 2000:16). In fact, there is more emphasis in the Dakar documentation on the crucial need for ‘sustained political commitment’ at the country level than at the donor level.

The last sustainability issue touched upon in Dakar is the crucially important one that the EFA project is not about reaching the EFA goals only but about sustaining the achievement of them. We have stressed that it is national political commitment that has to be sustained if the goals are to be reached. Only with that in place can aid also play a role, and that too must involve ‘longer-term and more predictable commitments’.

Once the IDT on environment had become an MDG on environment, in September 2000, the same year as Dakar, it is interesting to note that the wider political, social and cultural sustainability was not even mentioned. There was just the emphasis on reversing the loss of biodiversity and environmental resources, reducing by half those without secure access to safe drinking water; and ‘achieving a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum-dwellers’ – whatever that might mean or be measured.

By 2002, it was Rio +10; so was there the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg. Naturally the WSSD Report reinforced the two Education MDGs (on Universal Primary Education and Gender Parity), and the Dakar EFA Goals, but why? The simple answer is that ‘Education is critical for promoting sustainable development’ (WSSD, 2002: 51). But there was little investigation of this assumed relationship. What is worth remarking is that the WSSD does not restrict its interest in the promotion of sustainable development to basic education, but includes research institutes and universities. But this is not suggested only for their role in promoting sustainable development, but also so that universities and research units could actually become more sustainable in the poorer countries of the world, if there were additional resources to sustain their infrastructures and programmes. It has to be said that the main education message from the WSSD is

deceptively simple: 'Integrate sustainable development into education systems at all levels of education in order to promote education as a key agent for change' (WSSD, 2002: 52). This is surely easier said than done. Which is perhaps why the WSSD also recommended to the United Nations General Assembly 'that it consider adopting a decade of education for sustainable development, starting in 2005' (WSSD, 2002: 53).

The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) was duly assigned to UNESCO for the period of 2005 to 2014. And its scope was outlined through an *International Implementation Plan* [ISS] (UNESCO, 2005). This laid out the main objectives of the Decade, and the four major thrusts of the initiative: improving access to quality basic education; re-orienting existing education programmes; developing public understanding and awareness of sustainability; and providing training. But the ISS was aware that education and sustainable development are not an obvious married couple: 'Education is held to be central to sustainability. Indeed, education and sustainability are inextricably linked, but the distinction between education as we know it and education for sustainability is enigmatic for many' (UNESCO, 2005: 27). The character of DESD is further complicated by the recognition that there are three spheres of sustainable development: environment, society and culture, and economy. There are then a whole series of key or essential characteristics of ESD, which are so general as to provide little guidance for nations, whether developed or developing. It is not much help to suggest the following: 'These essential characteristics of ESD can be implemented in myriad ways, so that the resulting ESD programme reflects the unique environmental, social and economic conditions of each locality' (UNESCO, 2005: 31).

It should not perhaps be surprising given the sheer generality of what is encompassed in ESD that it was not until April 2008, three years after the launch of the Decade in 2005, that there was held the first meeting of the international advisory committee for the Decade. This was preceded by a Panel Discussion in preparation for the World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development, planned for 2009 in Bonn. At the Panel, leading speakers reinforced the global ambitions for the Decade: 'The objective of the UN Decade is to anchor the concept of Education for Sustainable Development in all education systems worldwide. ESD aims at moving people to adopt behaviours and practices which enable all to live a full life without being deprived of basic needs' (UNESCO, 2008). It is interesting to note that despite the title of the Decade, Education is not itself one of the Key Action Themes of the DESD. Hopefully the World Conference in 2009 will sharpen up the currently rather vague ambitions and aspirations of the Decade.

Compared to the generalities of DESD, the World Bank's *Education Sector Strategy Update* (ESSU) of that same year, 2005, is replete with very specific implications of education and sustainability. For one thing, there is an explicit concern with the emergence of aid dependency especially in the poorest countries of Africa with stagnating economies. Here the risk may be that sustained aid may produce 'high aid dependency for a sustained period of time' (World Bank, 2005: x). But the Bank's new education policy consists of just two main end results – pursuit of the Education MDGs and education for knowledge economies – but these both require improvements to access, equity and quality, 'along with more efficient and financially sustainable education systems' (ibid. 4).

At a more comprehensive level, however, the sustained pursuit of one of these end results – the Education MDGs – is seen to be critical to securing the other MDGs, including the MDG of environmental sustainability. Thus, as we said earlier, environmental sustainability cannot be pursued in isolation but rather in conjunction with other social sector and political commitments. But this end result –universal primary education- ‘is but a beginning step for survival in today’s complex, fast-globalizing world’. From the point of view of sustainable economic growth, higher levels of ‘education for knowledge economies’ needs to be brought into play: ‘Only by raising the capacities of its human capital can a country hope to increase productivity and attract the private investment needed to sustain growth in the medium term’ (World Bank, 2005: 20). The Bank has seized on the information and knowledge revolution, and sees that a country’s competitive international position is inseparable from its ‘capacity to produce, select, adapt, commercialize and use knowledge’. This knowledge revolution provides substantial opportunity for both poverty reduction and sustainable development (ibid. 26).

The Bank’s recognition that sustained momentum on EFA needs to be combined with a sectorwide approach to education, and with other multi-sectoral investments has become part of many other agency approaches to education and growth. Thus, DFID (2008), in its most recent *Research strategy*, 2008-2013, has revisited its concerns with poverty reduction and growth. This does not mean that DFID has abandoned its focus on poverty reduction, or on pro-poor growth, but its most current judgment is that growth is more important to poverty reduction than previously thought. ‘It is perhaps responsible for as much as 80% of poverty reduction’ (DFID, 2008: 21).

We end this short account where we began with a re-affirmation of the intimate connections between sustainable financing of education, political commitment to education, and sustained economic growth. Hopefully the new emphasis on growth will tease out not just the correlations between different levels of education and growth, but also what are the qualitative drivers of these effects. Two very recent studies by Keith Lewin and Erick Hanushek respectively will help to start us out on this trail. Here are their conclusions:

Expansion at the secondary level without attention to financial realities will jeopardize quality and achievement, generate disillusion with the costs and benefits, and miss opportunities to close the gap between SSA and other regions of the world in the knowledge and skills of the next generation. The sustainability of greater access will depend on consistent economic growth. This is much more likely with the strategic development of secondary schooling than without it. (Lewin, 2008: 161)

Our evidence of a clear, strong relationship between cognitive skills and economic growth should encourage continued reform efforts. Improvements in mathematics performance called for by *No Child Left Behind* would matter, contrary to what critics sometimes suggest. Yet reformers should bear in mind that money alone will not yield the necessary improvements. Many expensive attempts around the world to improve schooling have failed to yield actual improvements in student achievement.

Economic growth flows only from reforms that bring actual improvements in cognitive skills. Identifying what works and how to implement it on a society-wide scale remains

a challenge, not only for the U.S., but also for many nations across the globe.
(Hanushek, 2008: 70)

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